Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

Career Compass No. 36: Engaging Employees for Success

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest writes a prescription for turning a bored employee into a superstar.

I'm a relatively new supervisor for an accounting group in a large local government. I want to enhance my contribution, make my mark as a good supervisor, and advance in my organization and career. However, I find that my group is fairly lackadaisical. While there are one or two exceptions, many of my direct reports do the work with almost no enthusiasm and take little initiative. I'm committed but I don't sense the same level of commitment with other team members. I try to motivate the group members but with minimal success. For the most part, they exhibit a "Thank God, it's Friday" mentality.

To make matters worse, I've noticed that work attendance is sketchy for some and the unit has experienced troublesome turnover. Do you have a few suggestions?

What you report is unfortunately quite normal for organizations across sectors and in fact across nations. Most employees are simply not actively engaged at work.

Three Groups

The Gallup Organization has surveyed millions of employees in thousands of organizations. Through its research, Gallup has identified three groups of employees.

1. ACTIVELY ENGAGED

These highly motivated individuals are outcome-focused, committed to productivity and quality, drive innovation, move the unit and organization forward, and are accountable. They exhibit a passion for the work and a profound connection to the enterprise.

2. THE UNENGAGED

The non-engaged are just average performers, task-focused, see the work as merely a job, show little initiative, and are not committed to the success of the organization. They have "tell me what to do" and "it's only a job" mindsets. The can hardly wait for lunch.

3. THE ACTIVELY DISENGAGED

The actively disengaged are "checked out." Still worse, they are negative, often display anger and mistrust, and undermine their group and organization. These employees are destructive. They are often called "ROAD" ("Retired On Active Duty") Warriors or "CAVE" ("Consistently Against Virtually Everything") Dwellers.

Research by the Gallup Organization shows that fully 70% of all American employees across private, public, and nonprofit sectors are unengaged or actively disengaged. Across all organizations, the percentages for the three groups (as a percent of all employees) are as follows:

- Actively Engaged—21-30% of all employees
- Not Engaged—45-52%
- Actively Disengaged—17-38%

The Impacts of Engagement

While many might feel that employee engagement is a "squishy" concern, there is much hard data underscoring the importance of engaging employees.

When employees are engaged, the Gallup research shows that these measurable results are achieved:

- Performance and productivity go way up
- Customer satisfaction increases
- Discretionary effort jumps
- Problem-solving, innovation, and adaptability improve
- Political support by the public increases as residents, business people, and others interact with energized and committed employees.

In the private sector, revenue, profitability, and stock prices significantly improve.

When employees are unengaged or actively disengaged, the research also indicates that all these costs sky-rocket:

- Absenteeism, including sick time
- Workers compensation claims
- Liability claims
- Mistakes and errors
- Turnover

The Approach

To address the lack of engagement, you need to understand three precepts.

First, a leader cannot "motivate" anyone. Only the employee can motivate oneself. The leader can only support one's motivation. As a supervisor, you want to provide resources, remove obstacles, support the efforts of staff, and recognize good work and achievement.

Second, everyone in the organization can contribute to creating robust employee engagement, including the chief executive, department directors, managers, supervisors, and employees themselves. However, the direct supervisor has the most influence in actively supporting highly engaged employees. As pointed out in *First, Break All the Rules* (based on the Gallup research), an employee joins an organization because of opportunity, compensation, and the reputation of the enterprise. Once the employee joins the organization, he or she most often leaves because of a poor relationship with the supervisor. The supervisor is the key leverage point in terms of employee engagement.

Third, a supervisor does not have to move all the actively disengaged employees to the actively engaged group. Rather, significantly better performance, productivity, and attitudes result from moving employees one level. In other words, you as a supervisor will have great success if you can help move several actively disengaged into the non-engaged category and some non-engaged employees into the actively engaged group. Of course, for those actively disengaged employees who do not respond to your support, you need to do everything in your power to help them find a new enterprise where they can contribute. You can't tolerate actively disengaged employees who undermine everyone and everything.

TEN TIPS

As indicated by the review of motivation studies conducted by Dan Pink (see his book *Drive*), people are not motivated by compensation once basic needs are addressed by employers. Employees desire meaning and purpose, some measure of autonomy, and the opportunity to master their work and craft.

To be more intentional and focused on employee engagement, consider these ten simple tips for direct supervisors and front-line managers.

1. Serve as a meaning "translator"

People thirst for meaning. Yet, oftentimes, they do not perceive the connection between their work and the organization's mission and goals. As a supervisor, you must specifically discuss how the work of the accounting group is tied to achieving the big goals of the organization.

Recognizing that stories and personal experiences are the most powerful way to communicate, you might ask "customers," including internal and external service recipients, to share in an e-mail, or better yet attend one of your staff meetings, in order to highlight how the work of the accounting team helps them achieve success.

2. Specify what is expected, engage employees in goal-setting, and provide feedback

Clarify expectations, roles, and responsibilities for the group and individuals. Employees need to know what is expected of them. Encourage employees to participate in goal-setting and performance metrics. Most employees want to be partners in the enterprise. Through ongoing discussions, review and modify expectations and hold people accountable. Immediately correct performance and behaviors that are inconsistent with organizational values or goals.

3. Discuss what employees need in order to do a good job

Start some conversations individually or as a group or institute a quick survey identifying any equipment, technology, or other resources that staff need in order to do a better job. Ask what non-value rules or procedures are getting in the way or have become outdated. Then do something about it. Often it is inexpensive. For instance, an HR Department group identified that projectors and easels for training workshops were broken, which hindered the training workshops conducted by the department. Once a few new projectors and easels were purchased, engagement scores significantly improved.

4. Be modest, ask questions, listen, request help

Don't try to have all the answers just because you are formally in charge. Don't give detailed instructions. Ask questions. Identify problems and ask for help in identifying the solutions. Promote "FIO" ("Figure It Out") skills. Listen intently, write down notes, and summarize what you heard. Then tie your decisions and actions to what you heard. People want to see that their opinions count.

Share mistakes as well as successes. Vulnerability is powerful (see Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability).

To solve problems, especially those that matter to employees, create time-limited works teams and ask them to report their recommendations at a specific upcoming meeting and then help implement the changes. As suggested by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, you can provide your team members with "opportunities for positive impact."

5. Focus on strengths

One of the secrets to success for a supervisor is matching individual employees to the right job or task. Don't focus on weakness but rather on strengths. It is your responsibility to uncover and strengthen employee talents and align them with the right assignments.

6. Conduct "stay" interviews

By conducting a "stay" interview over coffee with an employee, you can acknowledge the value provided by the individual and ask:

- What's working for you?
- What's not working?
- What makes a great day at work for you?
- What are your aspirations?
- How can I support your personal and professional goals?
- What distresses you and how can I help?
- What is something new that you'd like to learn in the coming year?
- What kind of recognition do you appreciate?

These one-on-one chats give you valuable information on how you can support the motivation of your employee and allow you to show that you care. Of course, you must follow up on these discussions in meaningful ways demonstrating that these conversations count.

7. Provide learning and growth opportunities

People do not want to stagnate in their jobs and positions. Employees of all ages are motivated by learning and challenge. Especially in tough times, learning, training and growth opportunities are "cheap" and demonstrate your interest. In terms of engagement, you can also get a "two-fer" by using talented employees to train others and share their knowledge.

8. Talk about progress

As suggested by Teresa Ambile in *The Progress Principle*, people need to see progress to maintain their motivation. Therefore, your job as an effective supervisor is to provide feedback and especially highlight steady progress in meeting milestones in pursuit of larger goals.

9. Recognize good work

Use multiple methods to recognize individual and team achievement. Bring coffee and bagels to a staff meeting in order to celebrate a team milestone. Put on each staff meeting agenda an item called "Team Accomplishments" and encourage everyone to acknowledge the assistance or achievement of someone else. Let managers and the department head and chief executive know of the good work by your group. Share stories and other feedback from internal and external "customers."

10. Promote employee wellness and balance

Where possible, provide telecommuting, flex-time, and other alternative work schedules. Encourage the use of leave balances, especially vacation time. Have individual "walking" meetings and encourage some off-site meetings and social time.

Resources

To learn more about this critical leadership skill of effectively engaging employees, here are some resources:

- Marcus Buckingham et al, *First, Break All The Rules*
- Dan Pink, *Drive* (also see TED.com video of Dan Pink on *The Puzzle of Motivation*)
- Teresa Ambile, *The Progress Principle*
- To view Gallup's twelve questions (called the Q12) used in assessing employee engagement, visit the Gallup Employee Engagement Overview
- The Human Resources Department of San Mateo County, CA, has developed an excellent guidebook entitled *How To Engage Employees* focused on the roles of department heads, managers, supervisors, and employees.

A Culture of Engagement

The supervisor-employee relationship is the most important relationship in the organization. A supervisor striving for better performance, organizational commitment, and just a more enjoyable work environment needs to slowly and consistently build a culture of engagement. Over time, many of your employees may adopt a "Thank God, it's Monday" mindset.

Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.